THE HOME AND EARLY HAVNTS OF R L STEVENSON BY MARGARET ARMOVR

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EDINBURGH

THE HOME AND EARLY HAUNTS OF R. L. STEVENSON

1895

ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

AFTER THE ORIGINAL PAINTING

BY W. BROWN MACDOUGALL


ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON
BORN 1850
DIED 1894

THE HOME AND EARLY HAUNTS OF ROBERT LOUIS STEVENSON

BY

MARGARET ARMOUR

WITH TWELVE

ILLUSTRATIONS IN PHOTOGRAVURE

INCLUDING NEW PORTRAIT

BY

W. BROWN MACDOUGALL



Edinburgh Riverside Press
W. H. WHITE & CO.
1895

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To

C. S. A.

AND

M. B. McD.

853735

IN MEMORIAM

R. L. STEVENSON



In Memoriam

R. L. STEVENSON

'The birds come and cry there, and twitter in the chimney, But I go for ever and come again no more.'

MOURN for the dead, departed
With unreturning feet;
The bright, the hero-hearted
No comrade more shall greet;
Mourn him whom shadows cover,
Unstricken by the years;
Mourn, Scotland, for thy lover,
Nor stint his meed of tears.

Waft, O winds! our wailing
Beyond the twilight verge;
In sorrow unavailing
Chant o'er his grave your dirge!
Alack! the wand is broken,
And mute the magic tongue,
Ere half the words were spoken,
Or half the song was sung.

IN MEMORIAM

Oh, fair may be his pillow
'Mid waters of the West,
And blue the shining billow
Round the haven of his rest!
But ah! the rugged mountains
And the tempests of the north
Were dearer than the fountains
Of the land that drew him forth.

How soft had been his sleeping
Beneath his country's sod,
Within the quiet keeping
Of the acre green of God,
With the daisied turf for cover
Where the drowsy shadows lie,
And the throstle singing over,
And the ash against the sky.

But though in vain his yearning
For the land he shall not greet,
And though no Spring, returning,
Shall tempt his tarrying feet,
Though few shall weep above him,
Or wander by his shore,
Here, in the hearts that love him,
His home is evermore.

MARGARET ARMOUR.

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.

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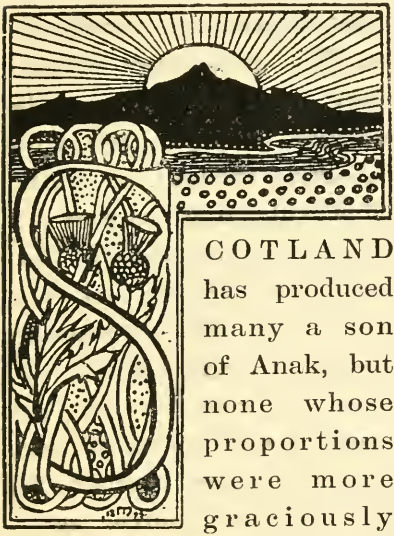
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THE HOME AND EARLY HAUNTS OF STEVENSON



SCOTLAND has produced many a son of Anak, but none whose proportions were more graciously noble than Stevenson's, or whose loss has left her more sorrowful.

We may be "dwindled sons of little men," yet one element of greatness remains in us. We can admire without envy those who revive the colossal tradition, and who, by taking thought and giving it art-utterance, restore by their cubit our ancient stature. When bidden shake our heads over their own emptiness, and resign ourselves to it as the common lot, it is cheering to think of one who found the wherewithal to fill his full from sources accessible to everybody; and when tempted despairingly to accept Emerson's abstract of

Thackeray's teaching — to "renounce ideals and accept London" — how encouraging is contact with a heart frankly aglow with romance and enthusiasm, and unerringly responsive to every sweet and deep appeal of life! To Stevenson the world is a "brave gymnasium, full of sea-bathing, horse-exercise, and bracing manly virtues." Into his outlook Cockneydom does not enter. Fortunate the man whose genius, like his, permits him to refuse the dusty paths, and strike for a worthy goal across the dewy tracks of fancy; who

goes exploring virgin forests of adventure, fingering the oaten pipe and discoursing wisely by pastures green! Keenly and widely cognisant of life, Stevenson had, moreover, that spiritual vision by which alone the rareeshow of Destiny can be viewed in proper perspective. He was more than a citizen of the world; he had the freedom of the universe. With head, heart, and soul, he has served his generation, and none are so poor, let us hope, as not to "do him reverence."

And from him, as from all the earth's great ones,

a wealth accrues indirectly. Everything ever connected with these receives an imaginative enhancement. Those who have lived with them, spoken with them, touched but the hem of their garment; the fields where they have walked; the house that has held them; the spots where they have sojourned—all receive an extrinsic value. The hero's way winds luminous through the comings and goings of lesser men, and he showers abroad the largess of enriched association.

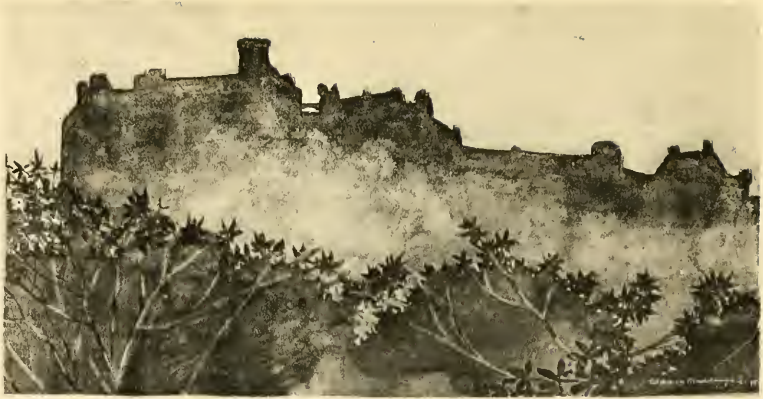
True, there are our Shakespeares whose obliterated

THE HOME AND EARLY track continues to baffle our geographers of greatness. But with Stevenson it is not so. He, himself, has drawn the chart of his journeyings; a complete itinerary may be compiled from his books; nay, in his "Memories and Portraits," he turns back from the later highways expressly to strew with finger-posts the sequestered scenes of his youth. These lay, as everyone knows, in the Lothians of Scotland. Or if any are ignorant, it is not Stevenson's fault, for never were early haunts dwelt on with such loving insistance.

EDINBURGH

CASTLE





HAUNTS OF STEVENSON

Scotland is happy in her sons. They grow to be her lovers, and among them is rarely wanting some poet-voice to praise her. She glows with the reflected light of literature. With Burns, Scott, Stevenson to proclaim her sovereignty, what wonder she sits proudly in her mists, receiving the homage of the nations! Each of these sings her as a whole, but each has some chosen part on which he specially dwells. With Burns it is the banks and braes of Ayrshire; Scott's heart is divided between the Highlands and the Eildons

by Tweed. Edinburgh won notes from both in passing; but with Stevenson it is the burden of the song.

He was born there at 8 Howard Place, in the year 1850. As the only child of deep-hearted parents, and surrounded by a sufficiency of wealth, in spite of a fragile physique, he may be said to have started with a firm foot on life. His roots were struck into soil of heredity unusually rich. "It is the chief recommendation," he says, "of long pedigrees that we can follow backward the careers of our homunculos

and be reminded of our anti-natal lives. Our conscious years are but a moment in the history of the elements that build us up." And so he whimsically saddles his homunculus with its share in his grandfather's doings as he "ran races under the green avenue at Pilrig; trudged up Leith Walk, which was still a country place, and sat on the High School benches, and was thrashed, perhaps, by Dr. Adam." He has excusable difficulty in joining himself on to the reverend doctor of his conscious knowledge, the Presbyterian patriarch

who stood "contented on the old ways," with a pulse suitably sobered to his calling.

But between his father and him the coupling irons are obvious. His father's talk, he tells us, "compounded of so much sterling sense and so much freakish humour, and clothed in language so apt, droll and emphatic, was a perpetual delight to all who knew him. . . . His own stories, that every night he put himself to sleep with, dealt perpetually with ships, roadside inns, robbers, old sailors, and commercial travellers before the use of

steam." Surely the son is just the father in print; in the parent the material is lying loose, which nature welds into genius for the child.

Little is said explicitly about nursery winters in town, but the "Child's Garden of Verses," in which they are embalmed, breathes an atmosphere of cosy kindness. Alison Cunningham, the heroine of that "bright, fireside, nursery clime" will live forever as the peerless nurse—

> "My second mother, my first wife,
> The angel of my infant life."

Such praise from her boy

must ring sweetly, albeit sadly, in the ears of the old woman, still alive in Edinburgh, for whom the childish prattle and the full voice of manhood have now become an equal silence.

There is no startling autobiography in the "Garden of Verses"—only evidence of a finely sensitised mental plate for the receiving and storing of impressions; excursions into that land of phantasy where there were, one day, to be such great possessions; fealty to familiar things; lavish gratitude; and the paramount need to love and

THE BIRTHPLACE OF

STEVENSON



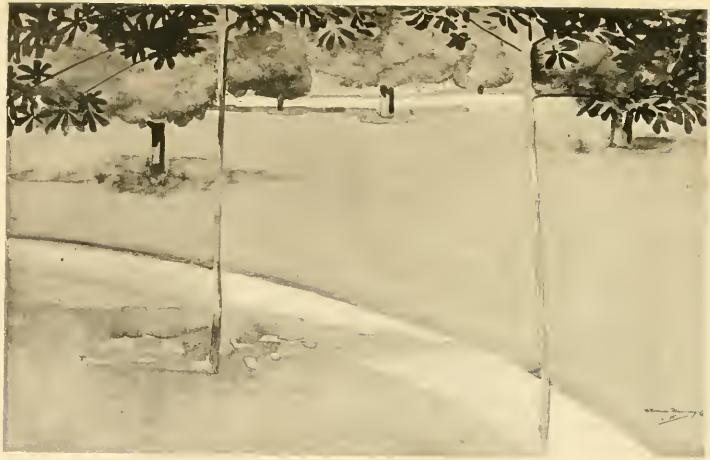
8 HOWARD PLACE



IN THE GARDEN

HERIOT ROW





worship. Stevenson was never without his hero. "Leerie," the lamplighter, founded the dynasty that had its *grand monarque* in Dumas. When he set himself to it, he could be acutely critical, as his *Familiar Studies of Men and Books* prove; but he was happier in enthusiasm, and, given a king worth throning, he favoured the theory of Divine right.

After his parents removed to Heriot Row, the common garden in front was his playground. It is well kept and bosky, but withal somewhat

serious. The little poet's ingenuity must have been taxed to transfigure it to romantic uses, and fancy have been forced to make its bricks there with rather a scarcity of straw. But with his country haunts it was otherwise.

The chief of these, and the most tenderly recalled, is Colinton Manse, about three miles out of Edinburgh, in a deep green dell. His maternal grandfather, Dr. Balfour, held the charge there for thirty-seven years, during the last eight of which he was favoured by frequent

visits from his little grandson.

The high-road, above, seems the usual distance from heaven when you are on it; but by the time you have plunged down the interminable flight of steps by the inn, that lead to the lower village, the upper level seems to neighbour the sky, and, with the high bank opposite, to form a lofty gallery round the secluded theatre where the Colinton folk play their unpretentious parts. A short climb and another plunge land you, past the church

door, in the Manse garden. The depth is abysmal, but only the depth. The river has here an acre or so of flat margin, on which the roomy Manse and lawn lie large, as if miles were at their disposal. On one side towers a sheer, wooded bank, and, on the other, the gravestones rise in solemn terrace. This is the garden with its water-door where, behind the weir, the river "lies deep and darkling, and the sand slopes into brown obscurity with a glint of gold," looking as low as Styx under the enormous bank opposite. Within a

COLINTON MANSE





WHERE THE RIVER LIES DEEP AND DARKLING





stone's throw is the mill, and, stretching up the hill, the miller's garden. Yonder are the plots behind the currant row where, "old and serious, brown and big," the gardener worked, who never seemed to want to play. This is the beloved valley, "brimmed like a cup with sunshine and the song of birds." Small wonder that the fairest blossoms in the "Garden of Verses" are culled from it. It was all enchanted ground, dear and delightful in itself, and enriched tenfold by merry, childish make-believe. Here Stevenson, in sailor suit,

THE HOME AND EARLY frolicked with other little folk, played Indian wars, saw "valiant battles lost and won," and was "all the thousand things that children are."

But the sunny picture fades, and the sad lines come to haunt us,

"All these are vanished clean away,
And the old manse is changed to-day;
It wears an altered face
And shields a stranger race.
The river, on from mill to mill,
Flows past our childhood's garden still;
But ah! we children never more
Shall watch it from the water-door!
Below the yew—it still is there—
Our phantom voices haunt the air
As we were still at play.

.

The eternal dawn, beyond a doubt,
Shall break on hill and plain,
And put all stars and candles out,
Ere we be young again."

The flour mill and the weir that served it are both gone; the river brawls shallow over stones, the miller's garden is annexed to the graveyard, no more to bloom in season with the hollyhock and rose, but to cherish indefinitely another seed, of late and doubtful flower.

" And it is but a child of air
That lingers in the garden there."

Change has exceeded prophecy; alas! it has falsified it too.

" Years may go by and the wheel in the river
Wheel as it wheels for us children to-day,
Wheel, and keep roaring and foaming forever,
Long after all of the boys are away.

You with the bean that I gave when we quarrelled,
I with your marble of Saturday last,
Honoured and old and all gaily apparelled,
Here we shall meet and remember the past."

Exile had not yet thrown its shadow.

Doubtless the old manse is the scene still of worthy labours, and its to-days full of life and interest as the yesterdays it recalls. But

THE COLLEGE

QUADRANGLE

EDINBURGH



beautiful as it is, it looks like the burial place of dead joy. These "rhymes of old delight" have fixed our fancy forever to the vanished hours and their owners.

Stevenson's early school days do not bulk largely in the "Memories." In fact he was not much at school. His father had a terror of education (so called), and often plumed himself on having been the author of Louis' success in life, by keeping him as much as possible from pedagogic influence. That the paternal

THE HOME AND EARLY efforts met with filial support, Stevenson's own confession assures us. "All through my boyhood and youth," he writes, "I was known and pointed out for the pattern of an idler"; and this was highly probable, for his industry was by no means the sort to be recognised in scholastic high places. He was a day pupil first at Henderson's, Inverleith Row, and then, for a year, at the Edinburgh Academy. While at the latter he edited an MS. school magazine, called the "Sunbeam." A water-colour

sketch by him in connection with this is still extant. It shows a small boy (the cousin who owns the picture) wrestling in the agonies of illicit composition for the "Sunbeam," in school hours, unconscious of the other agony that menaces from behind in the shape of uplifted "taws." The colour is delightful, and, in spite of doubtful ethics, the sketch uncommonly good. Had not writing been the only proficiency that attracted Stevenson, his budding draughtmanship might have blossomed, and art have

been added to his many conquered provinces.

Of boyish holiday haunts there were many. A cousin and early playmate recalls Craigleith Quarry, on the Queensferry Road, and "very sportive places" behind it; also the picturesque path that winds from Musselburgh up the Esk, where, he says, "the rounder, larger leaves gave the place a look of never seeing any one but us." Burns were followed to the sea, and links and copse allowed to tempt to many an hour of "idlesse." A favourite tramp of the more

bracing sort was round by Liberton and the Braids. Spots further afield, too, were visited. The Hawes Inn at Queensferry, that made such a call on Stevenson's fancy, and figured in *Kidnapped*, later, saw him often, and never failed, he tells us, to put him in a flutter, and "on the heels, as it seemed, of some adventure that should justify the place." The lonely, blue bay of Gullane, with its amphitheatre of golden sand dunes, played an important part in *Katriona*. Cramond, North Berwick—the Forth,

up and down for many miles, gave material for day-dreams and adventure.

Sandwiched into those years there are experiences of travel. Two winters were spent with his mother at Mentone, where he attended school. At the age of thirteen, at Nice, he began his acquaintance with Dumas, through the study of illustrated dessert plates. Early journeys into England, too, there were. We read of the windmills the Scotch child falls in love with, and that keep turning in his dreams; "the warm, habit-

THE CALTON GRAVEYARD



"Where he went to be unhappy."



able age of towns and hamlets; the green, settled ancient look of the country; the lush hedge-rows, stiles, and privy pathways in the fields; the sluggish brimming rivers, chalk, and smock-frocks; chimes of bells, and the rapid, pertly sounding English speech, . . . all set to English airs in the child's story that he tells himself at night." Each scene makes its own impression, not effacing but accentuating the one before, and all becoming mutually determinative. There was also half a year's experience of a boarding

THE HOME AND EARLY school near Isleworth, of whose fights and games and politics he talked much.

But, ere long, memory is busy again with the old haunts. Edinburgh University, in all innocence, inscribes a new classic on her roll. In the self-likeness he has left us of this period, he is a "lean, ugly, idle, unpopular student."

He takes care here, too, that his education shall not be interfered with, by acting upon "an extensive and highly rational system of truantry." In the intervals, however, of his

serious work—scribbling in penny version books, noting down features and scenes, and commemorating halting stanzas—his professors get some of his attention. But even then it is more as men than teachers. He could have written much better papers on themselves than on their subjects. Indeed, he has done so. Kelland he has immortalised. "No man's education is complete or truly liberal who knew not Kelland. There were unutterable lessons in the mere sight of that frail, old clerical gentleman, lively as a boy,

kind like a fairy godfather." The best of these lessons Stevenson no doubt mastered. He may have failed to square the circle, but he learned to measure a gracious nature. If getting at the human juicy fibre of things, rather than the dead skeleton had meant medals, he would have been hung with them. As it was, his main achievement was to escape from the stage of studentship "not openly shamed."

One of the many exploits on By-path Meadow during this term of desultory study, was the penny version-books'

transformation into the printed pages of a college magazine. The magazine, though it failed, cannot altogether be accounted a *fiasco*, since *An Old Scotch Gardener* is recast from its pages. Other of his by-path doings were his strolls in the Calton Churchyard. As a child at Colinton he had hobnobbed with gravestones, and in the grim town cemetery he renewed the sombre fellowship. Thither he "went to be unhappy" and to moralise the spectacle into a thousand similes.

But all this time there

THE HOME AND EARLY were the legitimate roving-grounds, the holiday excursions, and the long summers in the Pentlands. Among his loafing-gear, you may be sure, the straight-jacket of convention did not figure. Even in town, that hung mostly in his wardrobe; indeed, it had a brand new look to the end. These were his days of velveteen coat, long hair, and straw hat. Stretched on the warm grass or heather, he continued to eschew with devoutness the busyness which he considered an indication of defective vitality. He cul-

SWANSTON

COTTAGE





THE GARDEN

SWANSTON




W. Brown Macdougall
95

tivated the leisures of the mind.

A summer house was rented by his family at Swanston. This curiously secluded village lies behind a farmhouse at the base of the northern spur of the Pentlands, which rise gravely green from the plains, and, with many a peak and scaur and loch, file in solemn line to the sunset. The house is built for happiness. You reach it by a shady side-walk. Its walls are washed with warm ochre. It is modest in size and well-shaped, like a miniature

mansion-house, and free from all taint of villadom. The back ground is a steep bit of brae, stopping short about the level of the roof. To the side is a gloom of pines, from which drop the "rocks overgrown with clematis." The trim garden falls down a southern slope, that begins to curve up at its bottom to the gigantic parallel ridges of Caerketton. In summer these tower for a thousand feet, in winter they are met half-way by the mist, whence fancy can follow them at will to the very gates of heaven.

There Stevenson watched the ways of man and beast, and the kindly doings of Nature, weaving romances and working with words. There, on some high knoll, the "sea-beholding city in the distance, and the world spread out like a piece of travel" below, he would sit "like Jupiter on Olympus, and look down on Men's life."

Two of his best character studies hail from here. Every one knows John Todd, the Swanston shepherd, and Robert Young, the old Scotch gardener. The latter has a

THE HOME AND EARLY summer setting. With his spare form and old straw hat, in the garden in the lap of the hill, among his sunflowers, dahlias, wall-flowers, and roses, descanting in antique Scripture idiom on the great situations he has filled, till he "shrank the very place he cultivated," he moves as deathless as the sunshine.

John Todd looks out at us from the grimmer frame of the wintry hills. To describe him would be to quote what all have read, or to attempt a weak paraphrase. One can imagine the tingling delight

SWANSTON
VILLAGE





NIGHT SCENE ON
HALKERSIDE





of those brave trampings in his company, over Halkerside during the solitary winter spent at Swanston. The early darkening, and the weird stretch of snow-landscape beneath it; the excitement of the sheep review; the racy talk of the wrathful, kindly man, enthralling with tales of the old droving days, and with dog stories that would have shamed any sporting paper. Then, the bracing ordeal over, there is the night in the lamp-lit snuggery, the croon of the wind along the moors, mingling with the

musketry of Dumas. Enviable the life that could fill itself at such simple sources, and turn all water into wine!

Alas! here, too, the old house

> "wears an altered face
> And shields a stranger race."

Here, too, phantom voices haunt the air. While I write the sky is bleak. Nature's shutters are up. White hills and plains lie sheeted like a dwelling closed in the absence of its master. The west wind will blow again and air them, and the sun season them with its

fires, but one tenant has departed to "come again no more."

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